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ABSTRACT

This paper offers principles of mobility education for students with visual impairments, stressing that mobility training is a shared responsibility among teachers, parents, and the mobility specialist. It notes that the basis for mobility education is independent travel as a reachable goal, that the purposes include providing the child with a meaningful understanding of his environment and increasing self-confidence, and that advanced mobility education must be integrated with vocational education activities. A mobility program of six interdependent areas is described: (1) body image training, (2) sensory training, (3) indoor orientation and travel skill building, (4) outdoor mobility concept development and cane techniques, (5) outdoor mobility in the school and home neighborhoods, and (6) outdoor mobility in small business areas and public transportation. Eighteen specific suggestions for parents and school personnel to build mobility skills are offered. (DB)

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MOBILITY EDUCATION FOR STUDENTS WITH VISUAL IMPAIRMENTS: A SHARED RESPONSIBILITY

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MOBILITY EDUCATION FOR STUDENTS WTIH VISUAL IMPAIRMENTS: A SHARED RESPONSIBILITY

Mobility education refers to the process of planning and implementing the learning experiences of visually impaired children and youth so that the knowledge, skills, and competencies needed for safe and efficient travel in the environment are mastered. These learning experiences are principally under the direction of the school; however, the experiences take place in the students' homes, the community, as well as the school. Therefore, mobility education is a shared responsibility between teachers, parents, and the mobility specialist.

Basis for a Mobility Education Program

The planning for mobility education in a school program is based on the following ideas: 1) Independent travel is a reachable goal for visually impaired children; 2) a mobility program from which the child can benefit during his school years allows him to accept and participate in travel experiences similar to those of his sighted peers; 3) positive attitudes may be developed toward independent travel when a child is given regular lessons in mobility and systematically learns to cope with the inherent dangers of travel; 4) mobility adds to the child's physical and mental development and enhances his relationships with others in the school and in the community; and 5) the school setting provides many travel opportunities which will help the child view independent travel as a useful skill (Thomas, 1970).

Purposes of Mobility Education

The purposes of orientation and mobility instruction are to: 1) provide the child with a meaningful understanding of his environment; 2) provide a safe and efficient method of travel that will enable him to explore and to move at will in his environment; and 3) increase self-confidence and effectiveness in interpersonal relations (Weiner & Hill, 1991; Thomas, 1970).

Mobility Education and Vocational Education Activities

The Divison of Rehabilitation Services in all states provides visually impaired and other persons with disabilities, ages 16 years and older, with vocational counseling and training services. However, students are limited in their ability to discuss job opportunities and educational and training opportunities unless they possess an adequate reservoir of knowledge developed through career awareness, job exploration, plant and business visits, career conferences and school and family discussions relating to jobs and employment. The need to combine advanced mobility activities with vocational education activities has been articulated by Hanninen and Thomas (1982). The rationale and stated objectives of these activities are to: 1) broaden the students' knowledge and interest in the work world; 2) increase the students' awareness of jobs and the necessary preparation for various jobs; 3) provide students with an opportunity to observe real work settings and situations; 4) assist students in determining their suitability for various jobs

based on observation and information received on the trips; 5) familiarize students with the multitude of activities which people perform to earn a living, diversified and well as routine and monotonous tasks; 6) provide students with vocational information which will enable them to make sound vocational choices; 7) instill in students a positive regard for all kinds of work; 8) acquaint students with the acceptable rates of pay for various jobs; 9) expose students to various attitudes with which employers regard visually impaired workers or prospective visually impaired workers; 10) expose students to a variety of travel situations which they may encounter in getting to and from work; 11) expose students to a variety of neighborhoods and business districts within their community, and provide supervised experiences with challenging travel tasks particular to special areas; 12) provide students with limited trips on public transportation to adjoining communities which can be potential sites for educational and vocational opportunities; and 13) provide students with experience in planning trips to unfamiliar areas of their community with the aid of public transportation information services and schedules.

Employer benefits may also be recognized in program activities. Such activities would: 1) expose employers to visually impaired students in a positive way; 2) serve to remove some of the negative attitudes toward visually impaired persons which are common among sighted persons; 3) tend to make employers aware of current educational and training procedures for visually impaired students; and 4) permit an employer to use his business as a learning laboratory for visually impaired students.

Orientation and Mobility Procedures and Techniques

Independent mobility provides children with the necessary techniques,skills, habits, and attitudes needed to navigate safely and independently indoors and outdoors. Even when small, a visually impaired child must learn appropriate techniques and develop mobility skills in order to navigate within the school--locating classrooms, toilet facilities, lunchroom, gym, office and various entrances/exits of the building. Being able to exit via designated fire routes, locating emergency shelter areas within the building, locating his playground area, and locating his bus or van pickup area are additional travel challenges to be mastered. When a visually impaired child has developed adequate outdoor travel skills and can exercise sound judgment under varying travel conditions, his parents are encouraged to allow him to travel independently in his neighborhood. All independent travel requires the child to recall routes in proper sequence, remember pertinent landmarks and clues, and apply this information to the situation at hand. He must simultaneously be using appropriate techniques to prevent injury and must be observing basic rules of safety. He must be sufficiently composed to deny or accept assistance while maintaining his orientaton, and the student must know what procedures to follow if he gets lost or disoriented. To help visually impaired chidren master these kinds of mobility tasks, a mobility program consisting of six areas is used. These areas are interdependent, and students may receive concentrated instruction in several of them simultaneously.

Area I -- Body Image Training. Body image training helps children develop an understanding of their body. Efforts are made to orient each child to his body, to teach him the many ways the body is able to move, and to help him coodinate his body movements. Besides improving gait, posture, and

coordination, this training does much to improve directionality, laterality, sense of turn, balance, and concentration--all of which are necessary for good independent mobility.

Area II --Sensory Training. Sensory training helps children use their intact senses to gather pertinent information about the environment, and how this information can be used to aid his orientation and mobility. In any situation, the sensory perceptors may receive relevant and irrelevant clues, and the child has to learn to select and use the most meaningful information received.

Area III -- Indoor Orientation and Travel Skill Building. This area of instruction stresses the development of sensory-motor skills and spatial-environmental concepts for safe travel techniques within the school. These skills and concepts, when related to a philosophy of independence and mastered by the child, will help him develop a high degree of independence and will add to his physical and mental development.

Area IV -- Outdoor Mobility Concept Development and Cane Techniques. This area of instruction helps the child develop a mental image of the outdoor environment, including street configurations and significant landmarks. Additionally, the student must develop confidence in himself as a capable person and proficiency in the long cane methods.

Area V -- Outdoor Mobility in the School and Home Neighborhoods. This area of instruction focuses on the application of the long cane methods to leave the school (or home) and travel to given destinations in the neighborhood. In real and actual situations the child experiences some of the unpleasant aspects of independent travel--encountering stray animals, getting lost or disoriented, stumbling on broken or uneven sidewalks, bumping into obstacles due to inadequate cane techniques, walking on muddy terrain, and being out in inclement weather. He may also derive pleasure from meeting people and gaining new friends. As the student benefits from his mobility experiences, he learns to stay composed under most of the stressful situations which sometimes accompany independent travel, and assumes greater responsibility for his own safety. He learns to evaluate his own travel skills and limitations, and most importantly, the student develops positive or negative attitudes regarding his independence or lack of it. Guidance and support to the student during this crucial phase of mobility instruction is pertinent.

Area VI -- Outdoor Mobility in Small Business Areas and Public Transportation. Small business areas with block after block of stores and shops offer the student opportunities for continued growth and development. Attention is focused on getting to a shop or store safely and efficiently, and making purchases and securing information about the various businesses and offices. This area of instruction also includes the use of public transportation. Efforts are always made to teach the child information and skills which are relevant to him and his personal goals.

Suggestions for Parents and School Personnel

The joint efforts of the orientation and mobility specialist, parents, and school personnel cannot be overemphasized since orientation and mobility

experiences which are beneficial to the student can be initiated by either. The following suggestions can easily be implemented by parents and school personnel provided they have participated in several orientation and mobility workshops. It is suggested that parents and school personnel: 1) help eliminate gait, posture, and coordination problems by having the child do appropriate movements and exercises several times weekly; 2) provide the child with sensory and sensory-motor experiences which will help him develop a sense of order and organization; 3) orient the child to new environments; 4) create travel opportunities for students who have mastered routes within the school so that the child will use his mobility skills daily; 5) periodically monitor children as they travel indoors to insure that appropriate techniques are being used; 6) plan field trips so that each student will know the destination of the trip, type of transportation to be used, and route of travel; 7) familiarize students with streets and businesses in the immediate school or home area; 8) provide students with limited bus experiences by using public transportation to go some places; 9) provide the child with trips to and experiences in drug stores, department stores, banks, theaters, and other business establishments--always pointing out the kinds of merchandise found and/or services rendered; 10) provide students with in-school and at-home experiences which will foster the development of mature behavior; 11) relate academic subject material to orientation and mobility; 12) discuss various ways for the child to answer or refuse to answer questions relating to his disability; 13) have the child dramatize and act out ways in which help and treats by strangers can be tactfully refused; 14) assist the child in eliminating mannerisms or other unacceptable habits which will attract negative attention to the child; 15) help the child develop good communication skills with emphasis on oral expression and listening; 16) help reduce the child's travel anxiety by encouraging and reassuring the student who is fearful of independent travel situations and who has little confidence; 17) help motivate the student who has little or no desire to travel independently; 18) help the child develop a positive attitude toward independent mobility (Thomas, 1970; Thomas, 1972; Thomas 1979; Weiner & Hill, 1991).

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